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CHAPTER 10

BIRTH AND INITIATION

858 The birth of a child is an occasion for rejoicing, and the event is announced by saying: "The new relation has arrived." Children are spoken of as the gift of *Cando*, which indicates that they are considered to be assets to the family. It is true that boys are rather more welcome than girls; every family desires that the first child should be a boy who will ensure the survival of that particular family within the clan. A boy can inherit his father's lands, and one day he will be required to assist at his father's funeral ceremonies and perpetuate the worship of his own ancestors. Girls are welcomed, though not to the same degree. Through their marriages they will in due course extend the range of the family's relationships, but they bring but a small economic return to their parents, and the bride price received at marriage is not comparable to the expense of bringing them to maturity. Where a family consists of both boys and girls in equal proportion the girls are well treated, and when later on they go to other homes their places will be filled by daughters-in-law. When, on the other hand, a woman gives birth to a succession of daughters she is likely to feel the displeasure of her husband's relations. A third or fourth daughter born into a home where the husband's mother reigns supreme does not enjoy much prospect of survival. Children are valued from the first because of their potential working ability. A villager, on hearing that a birth has taken place, responds at once with the question: "What is it? Does it carry on the shoulder (a boy) or does it carry on the head (a girl)?" Or he may say: "Is it a hunter or is it a water carrier?"[1]

842 There are Hindu shrines in the area to which Santal women resort along with others when other means of securing the birth of a longed-for child have proved of no avail. A spirit who can grant the boon of children resides near the village of Raniband at the summit of a hill which rises abruptly from the plain and is the highest point in the whole area. Cases have been reported of Santal man and wife making the climb together in order to present an offering. In most cases, however, the husband preserves an air of indifference; if his wife fails to bear a child he is

[1] Another way of referring to the sex of children, though not at the time of birth, is for a parent to say: "I have three *iṛi* and three *erha*", which signifies three boys and three girls. *Iṛi* is a cultivated millet (*Panicum crusgalli*, L.) and *erha* is a cultivated grain (*Setaria italica*, Kunth).

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cation. In many cases Bengali names that bear some resemblance to the form of the private name come into use. Thus Podo has become Padma Lochan and Kala has become Kalachand. Ernest Soren was known throughout the countryside by the name that he received at his baptism. At the time of his *chatiar* he was given the name of Singrai, this being the name of his paternal grandfather's elder brother. From the same time he was addressed as Jhongol, thus receiving not only the private name but the outer name of the same relative, who was not then alive. Before he could walk he was usually addressed as Thenta, a name that signifies a restless bundle of mischief. Later when he was growing up he was known by his contemporaries as Dangra Sorkar, or Sorkar for short. The name Sorkar is often applied to those who are going to school, but he was known as the "bullock" Sorkar because he did not conceal his fondness for beef, whereas educated Santals are generally supposed to conform to Hindu custom and shun it. Names of relatives are bestowed without regard to whether the relatives concerned are living or dead.

The village community takes no formal notice of the growing child after the performance of the *janam chatiar* until he is ready for the ceremony of initiation, or *caco chatiar*. *Caco* is a word that means a toddler, one who is learning to walk. The ceremony, however, is not performed until the child is growing up. It is somewhat misleading to describe the ceremony as one of initiation, for in comparison with the elaborate ritual with which initiation is accomplished in many parts of the world it is a pale and colourless proceeding. In the Bankura area the performance of the rite is of an extremely casual nature. It is nevertheless the equivalent for Santals of initiation ceremonies in other societies, and it retains its importance not because of the intrinsic character of the ritual but because of certain consequences that follow from its non-observance. Unless the *caco chatiar* has been performed, no Santal boy or girl may be married, nor cremated after death. It may be that the custom has been drastically modified because of the expense involved, as the whole village should be feasted. It is now customary for families to wait until the ceremony can be performed for several children at the same time, and it is therefore delayed until the impending marriage of the eldest child makes it inevitable. In the village of Barikul, Babulal recorded a case in which the father and the mother had been living together for some years without having themselves gone through any marriage ceremonial. For both of them it had